Cambodia was a relatively peaceful place in those years, Laos had not yet become a site of confrontation. In January of 1956, I left Indochina, having helped the Vietnam National Bank to be established. In Cambodia, the National Bank of Cambodia was established. In Laos, it was slightly slower. The Bank of Indochina stayed up there for a couple of years longer and the Lao Government took over financial control in a very peaceful manner. Most French realized that the era of French colonialism had come to an end in Asia. The more enlightened political leaders, for example, Mendes France and General de Gaulle were decolonizers. They realized that the time of overt political colonialism had come to an end. The overpowering influence of the former colonial power behind the scenes also had come to an end and different ways had to be found of working with these emerging nations. Was there bad feeling? Probably some, but not for very long. Colonialism had brought good and bad features. At first, the countries of Indochina saw us as supporters of their independence. As time went on, in all three countries, the authorities realized that the United States also had its priorities and they did not always coincide with the goals of the indigenous governments. For example, in Vietnam, Ngo Dinh Diem was killed; Sihanouk was forced out by Long Nol; and in Laos, the Pathet Lao replaced the King. It was too bad that the West did not accept earlier that colonialism had come to an end in 1945 with the conclusion of World War II.

In January 1956 we returned to Washington and that spring I formally entered the U.S. Foreign Service. I entered at the bottom of the scale as a FSO-6. At the time, that was the lowest level. Shortly thereafter, the ladder was extended by 2 grades to FSO-8.

Q: You came in 1956 as a 06, then fell back to 08, and got promoted rather quickly to FSO-7.

DEAN: That's right. That is exactly what happened to me. I fell back to an 8 and was quickly promoted to a 7 at my first FS posting. Before leaving Washington, I attended the FSO basic course where I made a lot of good friends.

Q: You started your FSO basic course when - in 1956?

DEAN: Yes, in 1956. Then, Jefferson Graham Parsons said "I need a very junior officer in the Political Section in Vientiane. I have been made Ambassador to Laos. I want you to go with me out there." I had an offer. Obviously, what had helped me up to this time was the fact that I had studied in France, spoke fluent French, and wrote French without difficulty (and if needed, I could always take the paper back to my wife who would correct it). 1956 was the period when we replaced the French in supporting the Meo tribesmen in their struggle against the communists. The French had used the hill tribes as mercenaries in their fight against the Viet Minh in North Vietnam. As you know, Dien Bien Phu is located in that area between Laos and North Vietnam where the hill tribes hold sway. The CIA was going to replace the French by hiring not the Thai Dam tribe as the French had, but by using similar people, the Meo people who were basically not Lao or Thai, but Chinese. They had drifted southward from China.

My big boss was Ambassador Jefferson Graham Parsons. He had a very able wife, Peggy. Ambassador Parsons believed in Foster Dulles' policies that all countries had to choose sides. Neutrality was frowned upon.

Q: You were in Laos from 1956 to 1958.

DEAN: Yes, I served two Ambassadors. Jefferson Graham Parsons who went back in 1957 to Washington to be Assistant Secretary for the Far East, at a time when Laos had moved to center stage in our effort to contain communism in Southeast Asia. The second Ambassador was Horace Smith, who did not speak a word of French.

Q: You were in Laos from when to when?

DEAN: 1956 to 1958. As the lowest member of the Political Section, I was the French speaker on the team. I worked with the Prime Minister, Souvanna Phouma, an outspoken Francophile and an avowed neutralist. The Ambassador at the time, J. Graham Parsons, who had been kind enough to select me to go to Vientiane, was close to Secretary Dulles and did not believe that countries should follow a neutralist course; rather, they should choose either "to be with us or against us".

Q: Did Parsons buy this? This was Dulles' line?

DEAN: Yes, but he was the executor of this policy. My wife and I had this personal relationship with Souvanna Phouma. We were asked at times to go to his house and play bridge in the evening. At the time, it became clear to me that the French did not believe that the policy pursued by Ambassador Parsons was the right one in Laos. I had a particularly close relationship with the adviser to Prime Minister Souvanna Phouma. His name was Mathieu. He was a military officer. He wrote speeches for the King; then, he wrote the answer for the Prime Minister, and then the Prime Minister would make a speech which required a response from the President of the National Assembly.

All the speeches were written by the same man: Mathieu. My wife and I got along with him. The Ambassador asked me to report directly to him, thereby knowing what was going on in Laos. There was no doubt that Mathieu was the best informed foreigner In the country. It was a time when the CIA sent an extremely able Station Chief. His name was Henry Hecksher. Henry and I got to be friends. From time to time, he would ask me: "Can you do this?" I felt my job was always to be helpful to my colleagues - so I did. One day, Hecksher asked me whether I could take a suitcase to the Prime Minister. The suitcase contained money, but I did not know that. Since I had easy access to most Lao, I complied. Whereupon, I received an official reprimand from the Secretary of State that I had abused my functions as a Foreign Service Officer, since a State Department Officer is not allowed "to pass funds"

Q: In the first place, how did whoever did the reprimanding action at the State Department find out?

DEAN: Somebody must have informed them. I never saw any difference between members of the Embassy. We were all supposed to be one team. What I did find out was that not only a suitcase was taken to the Prime Minister, but several suitcases full of money were being ferried over to the President of the National Assembly, Mr. Phoui Sananikone, who was much more In line with the official American position on Laos. But the delivery of these suitcases was not entrusted to me.

Unfortunately, events lead to a political confrontation between Souvanna Phouma, the neutralist, and Phoui Sananikone who was basically very pro-Thai and lent the American Embassy his ear. Souvanna was forced out of office in 1958, which coincided with the end of my tour.

Phoui Sananikone took over the reins of the government and initiated a more hostile policy towards the Pathet Lao. Souvanna Phouma's half-brother, Souvanna Vong, was Head of the Pathet Lao. The two brothers always kept some channels of communication open. Souvanna Phouma was a great believer in finding a negotiated solution. Phoui Sananikone not at all. He was more interested in fighting the Pathet Lao and favored the business interests in Southern Laos. My Ambassador, J. Graham Parsons, appeared to prefer Phoui to Souvanna. I do remember something which I think is of interest to future generations of Foreign Service officers. J. Graham Parsons was a reflective ambassador. He would write thinkpieces to the Secretary of State. Foster Dulles. Then. he would call me in and say: "John. (and I was then the lowest man on the totem pole) I know you disagree with this paper, so would you please write one paragraph, no longer than a page, and I will put it at the end of my message?" He started the paragraph. "My political officer, John Gunther Dean, disagrees with me. His views are" and I provided the rest. I thought, for a junior officer, I could not ask for anything more. I did differ, but I was pleased that I was allowed to put my analysis forward without having my criticism held against me.

Then, Parsons was recalled to Washington to take up the position of Assistant Secretary of State for the Far East. We received a new ambassador by the name of Horace Smith.

Q: Before we do that. what was the situation in Laos when you were there at that time?

DEAN: No, the joint government came much later, when I served again in Laos in the 1970s. The Pathet Lao were still up in the hills or on the Plaine des

Jarres. They were not yet a major military force nor was Laos yet a divided country. The King was still quite respected around the country. His son may be less so. But it was the beginning of the CIA training and arming the Meo hill tribes against the Pathet Lao. This trend was accelerated after the new Ambassador, Horace Smith, arrived at post. He arrived in Vietnam toward the end of 1957, Horace Smith was a China expert and spoke Chinese, Unfortunately, he did not speak a word of French. The working language in Laos was French. It was used in public speeches, in written communications with the government and in daily contact with the elite. Even among educated Lao, they used French among themselves. The Ambassador's inability to speak French made it difficult for him to communicate with the leading personalities of the Kingdom.

My wife and I were asked to help him. Ambassador Smith was a nice man, but people wondered whether he was the right man for the job. To assist in the communication, Ambassador Smith asked me to accompany him on his calls. The Ambassador would say something, and I would translate it into French. When the King, the Prime Minister, the Foreign Minister, or the Commanding General of the Lao Armed Forces spoke, I would translate into English and at the same time take notes. My wife and I played a similar role at the Residence when the Ambassador entertained. At one point, we were asked by Ambassador Smith to move into his residence to help him entertain. Later in 1958, when I accompanied the Ambassador on his calls, he said: "John, you know what to say". I would be allowed to say more or less what I knew was on his mind. I would present that point of view and take notes when the person answered. While the Ambassador was nominally in charge, there was another person at the post, the Head of the CIA, Henry Hecksher. who was both professionally able

and spoke good French. Soon, the officials in the Lao Government and in the Lao Armed Forces began to realize that the real power at the Embassy was not the Ambassador but the CIA Station Chief. I had good relations with Henry Hecksher. But it seemed to me that his orders were quite different from the policy pursued by the Ambassador. The Ambassador was supposed to support the Lao Government and basically not rock the boat. Henry Hecksher was committed to opposing the neutralist Prime Minister and perhaps bring about his downfall. That is what happened in 1958, and the pro-American and anti-Pathet Lao Prime Minister Phoui Sananikone took charge. American resources and support were funneled to Phoui's Government, probably at the expense of French influence, which had supported Souvanna Phouma. Phoui Sananikone, former President of the National Assembly and then Prime Minister, and his brother Ngon, were basically nice human beings. They were Bangkok-oriented. Souvanna Phouma was Paris-oriented. He was a prince from the ruling class. He was nationalist but looked to France not only to oppose communist expansionism but he also feared encroachment of the Vietnamese and Thais on his territory. He thought that the best way was to stick with the French. His policy was more oriented toward keeping Laos from being dismembered by neighbors and less motivated by fighting communism. In all these attitudes, Souvanna had a lot in common with Prince Sihanouk. Perhaps Souvanna was come educated than his Cambodian colleague.

The dichotomy in the American leadership in Laos got to be known in Washington. In 1958, when I returned from Laos, a Committee had been established in Washington on how to avoid a leadership conflict, a turf battle within large diplomatic missions overseas.

In 1960, after John F. Kennedy was elected, one of the first steps he took was to write a letter which has been institutionalized ever since. It is the Letter of the President to the Ambassador. It says that "You, Mr. Ambassador, are responsible to me for all the activities going on in the country of your jurisdiction, whether they are military, political, intelligence, financial, agricultural, economics, drugs, etc. except if there is a military command which is directly responsible to a higher American military authority outside the country." This letter was designed to make the American ambassador the coordinator of all American activities in the country of his accreditation. It meant that if the Drug Enforcement Agency wanted to run a certain operation, it needed the approval of the ambassador. If the CIA wanted to penetrate a certain institution, it needed the approval of the resident ambassador. If there was a conflict between U.S. agricultural interests shipping U.S. wheat or rice to a country, versus the Secretary of the Treasury making the money available for this transaction, the coordinator in the field was the ambassador. It also meant that the ambassador had to be well informed on all activities carried out by the representatives of U.S. departments and agencies within the diplomatic mission he is leading. Hence, when you have several intelligence agencies in large diplomatic missions and turf battles develop, the ambassador must arbitrate. If you have a professional ambassador at the post, he usually can weigh the pros and cons and make a decision on the spot. He does not have to consult "Washington". The Presidential Letter says: "You are in charge" so, you do it. It can happen that, for example, on drug enforcement issues, the CIA representative may have different views than the DEA officer at the post. The military may have a conflict with one of the Intelligence Agencies. They may be targeting the same person -- which could be a disaster. Both of them may be running against a double agent.

In the economic area, we may be dumping PL-480 rice into a country which is actually exporting rice grown at home. You, ambassador, are in charge of this. I would think this letter, which has been used now for the last 40 years, is one important reason why in sensitive posts the professional ambassador makes a difference. A political appointee having to arbitrate the differences among U.S. departments and agencies may not know all the ramifications of every decision which is to be made. On the other hand, most career people do have the background. Let me give you an example. A wife of a very prominent Prime Minister was deeply involved in the sale of drugs. We knew that. When the Prime Minister refused to sign a certain piece of paper which we wanted signed, we had to threaten the Prime Minister, or at least make it known, that we knew that his wife was very much involved in drugs. The paper was signed. The ambassador, as coordinator of U.S. activities abroad, is probably the only way to avoid in the field what is a problem in Washington where every department and every agency runs its own policies and operations. While theoretically the National Security Adviser to the President is supposed to be the coordinator, I don't think that every problem can be resolved from thousands of miles away. A good relationship between the National Security Adviser in Washington and the Ambassador at a sensitive post is very helpful to the over-all interests of the United States.

Q: Tell me, while you were in Laos, from 1956 to 1958, what was the the importance of Laos?

DEAN: It was being built up, artificially I think, as a major point of confrontation. If you think at one point there was a Bermuda Conference with British Prime Minister MacMillan involved with the American President

in trying to diffuse the confrontration in Laos, while most average Americans had never even heard of that far away place. Laos had become a flashpoint where the U.S. saw its interests being challenged by the communist world through the communist Pathet Lao. I thought this conflict had been blown up beyond our real national interests. We saw the Pathet Lao not as a national force, but as a prolongation of the communist Vietnamese and the communist Chinese. We saw Laos as part of a global challenge. The Bermuda Conference was held because it was feared that this regional confrontation could spread into a broader conflict. Mind you, we were living in an era of "containing communism".

Q: At the Embassy, were we saying that maybe this thing was getting exaggerated? You were a Junior Officer. Were people pretty much on board that this was the navel of the universe?

DEAN: Since I had been close to Souvanna Phouma personally and I played the role of liaison with the French, I supported Souvanna's neutral policy. With the approval of Ambassador Parsons, I could make known my views. I was allowed to dissent. Most of my colleagues thought their job was to support the new Lao Government under Phoui Sananikone which opposed neutralists and gave priority to fighting the communists. Also, many officers in the Mission were CIA staff involved in supporting the Meo forces fighting the Pathet Lao. There was relatively little dissent in our Mission. After the U.S. elections in 1958. when Governor Harriman entered the Lao scene, he supported again a neutralist general as counter weight to the warrior clan. That was in 1961-1962. It also reflected a slight change in U.S. policy. Dulles had disappeared from the scene. The elections in 1960 brought Kennedy to the fore and an effort was made

to find a negotiated solution. It was Harriman who at that point succeeded to deflate the Laos confrontation.

I would like to pay a tribute to a person who may still be alive: Campbell James. He was a CIA officer. His grandfather had been one of the founders of the Pennsylvania Railroad. He was quite flamboyant. I had started at my home regular roulette evenings. I learned how to be the croupier to run the roulette table. People were able to bet small amounts . I held the bank. This was a good way for the Lao military, Lao politicians, and foreign diplomats to come to my house. People of high rank came to our home to mix, talk, and enjoy themselves. Campbell James, who came from a well-to-do family, said: "John, why don't you introduce me to your friends?" I did. I felt -- and I still feel today -- that whether you work for this department or that agency, we all work for Uncle Sam. While he may have had different reasons for coming to my house, he was my colleague. When I was scheduled to depart post, I turned over most of my contacts to Campbell James, who continued to run roulette evenings and used fun evenings to make friends among the Lao military who loved gambling. Campbell James and I had contact with many foreign missions: Poles, Canadians, Indians... These roulette evenings helped to keep all channels open.

Perhaps the most important result of my tour of duty in Laos was the letter from the American President to the Ambassador which put an end to confrontation between different U.S. departments and agencies at diplomatic missions abroad, especially between the CIA and the Department of State. At least, that was the purpose of the Presidential Letter making the Chief of Mission the Coordinator of all U.S. activities under his jurisdiction.

Q: It became a very important instrument. Some ambassadors used it; some did not; but they had the authority up to a point.

DEAN: I used it extensively later, wherever I was assigned as Chief of Mission. Some called me a "meddler", an "intervener". Years later, when I appeared before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee for confirmation. Senator Javits chastised me and said: "If you are confirmed, Mr. Dean, will you continue to intervene in the domestic affairs of the country where you are stationed?" I think I replied to the satisfaction of the Senators, because I was confirmed. But when you are the American Ambassador , you have the means at your disposal to influence the situation. The naked truth is that the Ambassador is more "than a reporter." Often, he can't help but take positions. Whether you call this "interference" ... I don't know. For example, when you answer the question to the King "Are you in favor of this?" and you reply: "Yes", you have "intervened". Most of the time, when it's a vital issue, you can't say: "I am going to get my instructions from the State Department and I will get back to you." Your personal relationship with the interlocutor and his confidence in you matters. That is why I do believe that the selection of ambassadors is a very important process. Yes, there are many situations where the ambassador's advice or opinion is a form of intervention in the internal affairs of a country.

Q: While you were in Laos, was any European press present during the time you were there?

DEAN: It was still off the beaten path and foreign journalists were a rare breed. The medical facilities in Laos were also very limited. That kept some people away. For example, foreign women were reluctant to have their baby in Laos. My wife happened to be pregnant in Laos. Everyone urged her to go to the American Hospital in Bangkok but my